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## Football Star Mesut Özil in the Crossfire of German Media

### Abstract

*The photo of football star Mesut Özil together with Turkish President Erdogan sparked a controversy in German media with a political backlash in 2018. Criticism was manifold and linked to the athlete's representative function and the authoritarian style of Erdogan. However, the reasons for such strong reactions are much less superficial. Deep cultural reasons lay the ground for criticism on Özil. German identity has assumed a patriotic representation of athletes before the founding of the state itself and is deeply integrated in today's identity. How does this cultural-historical aspect matter today? The early 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a partial break with this tradition and a shift towards a more inclusive identity. However, since the European refugee crisis the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) demands a revival of traditional German identity. Insecurity in public opinion went beyond the AfD. Other parties have recognized the need to defend German identity and values vis-à-vis authoritarian ones. The general clash of identity, culture and politics heavily influence the backlash on an apparently unpolitical photo by Mesut Özil, who has been used as a political scapegoat.*

**Keywords:** Özil, Erdogan, migrant crisis, integration in Germany, German identity

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2018, German football star Mesut Özil started a nation-wide controversy with his photo on social media with Turkish President Erdogan, accompanied by team player Ilkay-Gündogan. As Özil not only has large fan groups in Germany and Turkey, the country of origin of his grandparents, but also in the international football scene, his media upload had a broad reach. However, the harshest criticism came from his country of birth. The immediate and heavy criticism from German politicians and the German Football Association (DFB) put

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pressure on Özil, who was about to kick off for the World Cup with the national team in spring 2018. After the tournament, Özil announced that he was going to quit playing for the national team due to discrimination and lack of support from the DFB. Many German politicians blame Özil's lack of diplomacy and insensitivity to contemporary political developments under authoritarian President Erdogan in Turkey. The publication of the photo with the Turkish President was originally of personal value and not politically motivated, yet critics doubt whether the player's relationship to Erdogan, who is suspected to have used the popularity of Özil for his own publicity in elections, was only formal in the end. Unfortunately, few have been genuinely interested in the star's reasons as he was grilled and at times deeply insulted for his photo by many public figures. The photo aroused discussions about whether integration of foreigners in Germany and their loyalty to liberal values has worked out so far or not. Especially after the recent migrant crisis in Germany this is a sensitive topic. Ensuing Özil's boldness to upload the controversial photo, the opponents of Özil revealed their tendency to discriminate in modern Germany.

This clash between Özil's intentions and his critics led to the question of why Mesut Özil as a seemingly apolitical athlete and football superstar became the center of attention of the German media, given the fact that numerous officials and leaders frequently meet authoritarian Presidents. Why is it important to tackle this issue? In times of political tensions, apolitical individuals often make political statements. In the case of footballers, that already begins with anti-racism campaigns. Yet, it is not easy for athletes to make personal statements. Although the result of Özil's photo was his regrettable withdrawal from the national team, there is a lot that athletes can learn about making public statements in the future, without losing face or disregarding their family identity.

I will answer the question in three segments. First, a historical-cultural background of German identity and the link to sports will expose the more subtle conditions for the debate, indicating how sports and athletes have been very closely linked to German identity in the past and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As an aging society, some people may still struggle with the new generation of football stars. Second, I will show why the photo was critical in recent political context and how politicians reacted to it. The tense political situation in Turkey, the Mediterranean migrant crisis and the debate about integration in Germany created a fertile ground for attacks on a photo with Erdogan. Third, the case of Özil will be compared to other athletes' struggles to put his case into a wider context and show why it is a special one. My goal is to point out that many different factors led to the situation in which Özil ended up in a media crossfire, more than the mere isolated facts of Özil's Turkish roots, Erdogan's person, or that the team disappointed German fans in the World Cup. Rather, it was the particular timing of several events and actors that came together simultaneously, building upon deeper societal problems. The insults and xenophobia in the reactions to Özil were certainly unacceptable and unjustified and this article aims explain why and how they came about.

## I. HOW DOES THE HISTORICAL-CULTURAL LINK BETWEEN SPORTS AND GERMAN IDENTITY SET THE STAGE FOR THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING FOOTBALL STAR MESUT ÖZIL IN 2018?

Not only does Özil have a large following on social media, but Germany has a special representative relationship with sports and football, in particular. Athletic culture in Germany is preconditioned by past political events. These cultural conditions imply that as a player of the national team he has an unofficial representative function, which is not necessarily consciously acknowledged but rather subtly assumed in Germany. This representative and organic function will be demonstrated in three parts. First, different historical sport events show how sport is of key importance in German identity. Second, the most popular athletes in German history have predominantly been white men, which increases pressure on Özil to justify himself for his Turkish family roots and the photo with Erdogan. Third, since Angela Merkel took up chancellery in 2005, football, as well as German society have become more inclusive. That came hand in hand with an alteration of German identity from an exclusively ethnic understanding toward a more inclusively cultural one. Yet, these mainstream developments do not appear in the whole society, so that, especially in football, athletes have to still actively advocate tolerance.

### *How have historical sport events shaped and represented German identity?*

With three examples I will give a brief overview of the special link between sports, the state and German identity. The first example of German national sports goes back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when in 1811 Friedrich Ludwig Jahn established the concept of German “*Turnen*”, literally meaning “to exercise” and “to do gymnastics”. (Pfister, 2019) This gymnastics movement grew to 6000 participants in the first 7 years. Politically it was primarily motivated to liberate German Prussia from the French occupation under Napoleon, the still enduring feudal revolution and to set a milestone for a German state beyond Prussia (Pfister, 2019, Eichberg, 2001). In this context participation also meant the support and promotion of a certain political view, regardless of whether one participated for personal reasons. The second important example of a sport-state linkage occurred in 1936, when Hitler organized the 11<sup>th</sup> Olympic Games in Berlin. This is in fact a counterexample, as Hitler’s wish to demonstrate a superior Aryan race failed with the Gold medal going to an Afro-American athlete Jesse Owens. (Muratovski, 2012) The Nazi leadership was annoyed and embarrassed when German star athlete Luz Long befriended Jesse Owens and helped him win the Gold medal. Although Hitler’s intention to link German identity to physical superiority and to justify his racist politics failed, it nevertheless marked another major event in global sport history. After the war, the myth of German physical power was still somewhere in the minds of people. All in all, the 1936 Olympics showed once again how sport was intended to be instrumentalized by the state as a model of a certain identity and ‘German’ behaviour. Athletes were supposed to behave in line with Nazi ideology and had been criticized for not following that line. The third case to illustrate this link between sport and state is the *Wunder von Bern*. In 1954, post-war Germany was still suffering from the consequences of World War II and pessimism about the future was widespread. (Seitz, 2004) After winning the FIFA World Cup in 1954 in Bern, called literally “the Miracle of Bern”, DFB President Peco Bauwens spoke of a rival-like patriotism in the form

of “we [Germans] are back again” and the German state would be sovereign from the allied occupational forces. (Seitz, 2004) Throughout Germany, patriotism was thriving and the idea that “we”, the people, are there again, strongly linked the national football team to German identity and would set the milestone for the team-people-state bond in the following century, a period in which Germany would transform into a more diverse society. On the whole all three examples imply that German athletes today are faced with their audience’s high expectations. Not only have German athletes in 1811 and 1954 fought for liberation and sovereignty in the Germans’ mind, but they were also favored and instrumentalized by the state in 1936 and 1954. Back then, a dual citizenship like that of Özil and others today was not possible. Athletes were considered ‘German’ without a doubt. Finally, athletes were further used to represent the entire German nation, as physically strong and committing their success to the whole country. That, however, changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***German star athletes and how we look at them***

While the previous historical examples go deep into Germany’s history of national identity, there is another category comprising the greatest, individually remembered athletes who were predominantly male and white. To name a few football stars from the past is to count Franz Beckenbauer, Lothar Matthäus, Gerd Müller and many more. The last generation has started to gain attention with Miroslav Klose, the top scorer with Polish roots who holds the world record of goals in FIFA World Cups, and the Ghana-born player of the national team, Gerald Asamoah. Mesut Özil thus not only fights with scepticism in comparison to previous idols, but also with performance pressure to keep up with Klose’s legacy in the national team. Surely, many of Özil’s opponents hide their disgust behind the argument that his skills would have to keep up to stay on the team and have called for his dismissal. Famous athletes in other sports are Dirk Nowitzki (basketball), Boris Becker (tennis), Steffi Graf (tennis) the only female in this list, Max Schmeling (boxing), Michael Schumacher and Sebastian Vettel (Formula 1). Most of them are the German “*Spitzengruppe*” (“top group”)<sup>2</sup> of best remembered athletes, and the recent winners of the 2014 FIFA World Cup must convince a hard-hearted audience that they are worthy of joining the “*Spitzengruppe*”. Apparently, it is mainly football as a sport that enjoys attention with the success of stars with a minority background. The combination of football’s popularity and the fact that athletic legends from other sports seem to reflect a ‘typical’ Germanness in the mainstream media might create an even more vulnerable condition for the far-right’s ideology. Klose and other superstars have mostly refrained from political debates and stayed rather neutral. From the far-right’s perspective, the controversy is a double scandal, since Özil as national player not only meets a disliked foreign President, but, in an unusual manner, takes a stand on it publicly.

Özil’s controversy might just as well be read to mean that it is no longer an unspoken secret that citizens can have multiple roots of identity besides the German one. Just like in the story of *the king’s new clothes*, far-right members are disguised only to discover something obvious

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2 Süddeutsche Zeitung. *Mehr als das Herz eines Boxers*. 19 05 2010 <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/sport/max-schmeling-mehr-als-das-herz-eines-boxers-1.927650>

like citizens who feel home in several countries instead of feeling home in either Germany or Turkey. Some radical political parties, such as the AfD, might instrumentalize this 'shock' and try to persuade everyone that Özil is a traitor.

***How does the link between nation, state and football work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

Since Chancellor Angela Merkel took office in Germany, the country gradually became more and more diverse and inclusive by shifting more towards the centre. (Green, 2013, Schmidtke, 2016) Under her leadership, while Germans with a background in migration have been becoming more 'mainstream', football did so, too. In 2006, Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup and received massive positive feedback from international celebrities, like Kofi Annan or Tony Blair, which was described as "the most enjoyable festival since the fall of the Berlin Wall", full of national pride (Merkel, 2014). From Benedict Anderson's theory on the nation state as an "imagined community", the World Cup fits into the permanent experience and memory of the nation. It was "imagined" because only a few Germans played in the team for the Cup, while most just watched but felt an inclusive connection. Therefore, it is implied that the country created once again a strong bond between football and its national identity that year. This "imagined community", which got reinforced in 2006, shows considerable vulnerability in 2018 when one of its 'representatives' speaks out for another "imagined community". What happened in the years between 2006 and 2018 was that the German national team became more and more diverse. (Merkel, 2014. 246). On the contrary, other sports like handball enjoy less popularity compared to football and the national handball team still doesn't have a single player with a background in migration. Football seems to be not only a mainstream sport that already replaced the gymnastics movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also a platform for the representation of mainstream politics and social life in the form of ethnic diversity (Pfister 2011). German identity became increasingly based on a cultural understanding rather than on an ethnic one and, therefore, the expectation of cultural 'Germanness' from national players has increased (Pautz, 2005) to the extent that ultra-conservative Germans became suspicious about the cultural integration of non-ethnic German players and many have come to see players like Özil as of use for Germany, but not as real Germans:

"They are not a generalized example of a democratic immigration society but stay – to use a popular way to frame it by politicians – German on paper, purchased foreigners which benefit us, and thus are subordinated to a special logic of functioning and exploitation." (Gebhardt, 2011).

While many eyes are fixed on the cultural integration of many football stars, another important factor between sport and the nation state is often overlooked. Despite its large instrumentalization for the promotion of peace between states, football is also used as a subtle zone of conflict between teams. (Ehrhart, 2006). It is not uncommon to use terms like "killer instinct", "bombing" and "overcoming the enemy" during games and football quickly becomes a matter of national honour in the absence of real war. (Ehrhart, 2006). In such primitive black and white frames, I make the hypothesis that complex social structures like a tolerant German society are easier to discard than to understand from a perspective where nationalism and war-

like thinking in black and white is still influential. The ongoing discrimination shows that in sports, especially in football, blind hate finds a target. Yet, this claim would have to be supported by further research.

What role does Özil have as an individual in this context? In 2010, Germany played Turkey and won with a score of 3-0. The ‘man of the match’ was Mesut Özil himself, who once decided to play for the German national team and not for Turkey like many other Turkish-Germans. (Merkel, 2014). By scoring against Turkey, he showed that nationality is not an issue for him, that the sport itself is of higher priority. Considering his effort for the German team, any criticism from the far-right against Özil loses ground. In the same year, the documentary movie *Transnationalmannschaft*, literally “(Trans-) national team” started to be screened in the cinemas. It shows how in the German city of Mannheim, Baden-Württemberg, many migrants celebrate the German national team at the Euro Cup 2010. (Kohl & Badakhshan, *ed.* 2010) Especially the Turkish migrants surprise by supporting Germany equally to Turkey and seem to have no problem with their dual support. In that sense, the ‘transnational’ team also has ‘transnational’ fans. Contrary to the use of war-like terms as mentioned in this paragraph, the movie shows that the national team can also peacefully unite fan groups beyond their nationality. For Mesut Özil, from that perspective, it is not an extraordinary act in 2018 to publish a photo with the President of Turkey. The Turkish-Germans in Germany (a term which Özil himself despises, since that would imply that they are not real Germans) don’t live in only one “imagined community”, which became more problematic when they expressed their support for President Erdogan after he gained even more authoritarian power after the 2016 coup d’état.

To sum up this section, since 2005 there has been a more diverse Germany and, at the same time, a more diverse national team than ever before. Descendants of migrants became mainstream in the country and in the national team as well. Yet, greater diversity and acceptance based on cultural values came with the disadvantage that some players have been watched too critically by sceptics, who accused them of not behaving German enough. Nevertheless, Germany has become known both for its diverse team and for the World Cup it hosted in 2006. While the language used on the pitch is still indicative of war-like circumstances in matches and makes it easier to propagate hate in the stadium, the sport in general peacefully unites people of German and Turkish ethnicities. However, as the next chapter will briefly show, the concept of “imagined community” is still critical.

## II. RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND COMMENTS

Now that we roughly understand the sport-identity link in Germany and the more diverse society, we will look at recent political developments that frame xenophobic and critically reserved reactions but also Özil’s photo.

There is a clash of ideas between general life in Germany and the Presidency of Erdogan in particular. Germany has a close relationship with the Turkish minority since the 1960s and had to face many debates about the integration of Muslim and Turkish migrants. The fear of parallel societies in Germany has worried those who believe that migrants would not stay loyal to

the German constitution and its values but despise it instead. The question of how Muslims live in Germany is not a new one but has been taken up again in the last years. For one, the migrant crisis increased concerns on the far-right that a Muslim invasion would undermine German sovereignty. Additionally, they fear that Erdogan himself would orchestrate such an event by financing mosques in Germany through the DITIB organization. Özil, a devout Muslim and proud member of the national team, is thus easily portrayed by the far-right as betraying the German society in a conspiracy with Erdogan. More reserved criticism and distance from Erdogan comes also from mainstream politicians. The detainment of German journalists in Turkish prisons, the foggy story of the 2016 Turkish failed coup d'état and the still unacknowledged Armenian genocide are only few of the reasons to hold back any euphoria among Germans upon seeing a photo with Erdogan. The fact that Turks and their German descendants are the largest minority in Germany easily puts Özil into an (involuntary) representative and diplomatic role.

However, there is more. In the deeply intertwined relationship with the European Union, German politicians juxtapose general Western values of democracy, liberalism and freedom of speech with Erdogan's authoritarianism. Erdogan is a key ally in the EU geostrategic migration policy and the far-right opposition party AfD in Germany takes every chance to bash migration policies linked to Merkel's government.

The migration crisis also revived the AfD from political extinction and is an important factor in recent political developments. As the European far-right parties gained more popularity in the last 5 years due to migration issues, more citizens became tempted to insult German minorities, refugees, Erdogan himself and of course Özil, the involuntary representative of the Turkish minority in this case. For the media and the members of the far-right, Özil's photo is a selling story for the former and a scapegoat for the latter, disregarding all efforts and successes Özil brought for German society. In fact, most critics forgot that it is quite customary to meet with even contested national leaders for formal reasons and de-contextualized the photo with Erdogan.

### ***How does the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany influence Özil's controversial photo?***

While the comparatively small Neo-Nazi party NPD demanded a "white" national team not only on passport but also based on skin colour, the new AfD is less extreme but comes in greater numbers and does not refrain from xenophobic comments. (Gebhardt, 2011). Contrary to previous arguments, AfD chairman Alexander Gauland does not think that the diverse national team represents German society, or to say it in his own words, the team is "not German anymore in the classical sense".<sup>3</sup>

The growing xenophobia from the right, with AfD gaining 91/709 seats in the 2017 German federal election, set critical circumstances for Mesut Özil's photo with Erdogan. While

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3 Zeit Online. Gauland – „Die Nationalmannschaft ist schon lange nicht mehr deutsch“. 03 06 2016. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-06/afd-fussball-nationalmannschaft-deutsch-populismus-alexander-gauland>

xenophobia in football “belongs to the history of the Bundesliga just as bet scandals” until recently, it did not overtake the whole state media and was widely met with rejection in politics. (Gebhardt, 2011: 98) Nevertheless, the rise of the AfD provided another point of friction for Mesut Özil to post a photo with President Erdogan. The far-right party comments on the photo called the player a “traitor” and declared that he was “not in the right place” in the national team.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the far-right ‘imagines’ a different ‘community’ than mainstream society. Yet, even the German head of state President Frank Walter Steinmeier invited Mesut Özil and Ilkay Gündogan to discuss why the two players have an important representative function in the national team. Gökay Akbulut member of Turkish descent in the Leftist party in the *Bundestag*, said that Özil should have abstained from the photo as he has a public responsibility. (Akbulut & Özils, 2018) According to her, the debate is too influenced by the AfD and reopens wounds related to the integration debate of German-Turks.<sup>5</sup> The rise of the xenophobic AfD exercised a lot of political pressure on other politicians to distance themselves from the photo. Were other parties afraid to just see what happened in relative terms or play it down and lose critical voters to the AfD? While even the left ist Die Linke lost many voters to the far-right AfD in the last elections, it comes as no surprise that parties try to take a critical position against Özil in order not to lose voters.

What Erdogan himself says in this situation, however, is merely a response to the AfD camp rather than to Germany as a whole. As absurd as it sounds, he simply accused Germany in general of racism and discrimination based on Özil’s religion, which of course was not completely fair nor accurate for most reserved criticism that came from the center of society, as the situation was much more complex.<sup>6</sup> The hate campaign of the AfD finally incited the media, other political parties and even President Erdogan himself to make inaccurate statements about the whole situation that Özil was in.<sup>7</sup> Despite not being the point of this article, it becomes clear how much power the AfD has gained with its hate speech against Özil.

### ***Lack of support from the DFB and the government***

Another factor which heated the debate was the lack of support and clearance from people around Özil and from government positions. Most prominently, Özil criticizes former DFB-chief Reinhard Grindel of discrimination against him as a Muslim Turk.<sup>8</sup> The idea of Grindel to focus on the World Cup and not discuss the photo during the press conference increased the suspicion in certain people that Özil had something to hide. Grindel’s reluctance heightened the impression that the player did something outrageous that could not be fixed anymore. However, Grindel in fact admitted that he was mistaken not to defend the superstar during

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4 Alternative für Deutschland. Seid Ihr noch richtig in der deutschen Nationalmannschaft? 21 05 2018. <https://www.afd-maier.de/2018/05/709/>.

5 Ibid.

6 Süddeutsche Zeitung, (2018). *Erdogan lobt Özil für Rücktritt*

7 Twitter. *Twitter post by Alice Weidel*, (2018). “Erdogan ist für Gündogan und Özil ihr Präsident”

8 Eurosport, (23-07-2018). The complete declaration of Özil about the photo can be found at [https://www.eurosport.de/fussball/mesut-ozil-seine-zusammengefasste-erklarung\\_sto6859289/story.shtml](https://www.eurosport.de/fussball/mesut-ozil-seine-zusammengefasste-erklarung_sto6859289/story.shtml) German language with photos linked to the official version in English on Twitter.

waves of insults in the media.<sup>9</sup> The criticism of Grindel himself reached a peak when, months later, he was involved in a scandal related to a wristwatch he received as a present from a functionary from Ukraine, confirming Özil's early prediction that Grindel was reckless for his position.

After the disastrous World Cup results, the manager of the national team Oliver Bierhoff, who later changed his mind, argued that they should have considered not letting Özil play due to his declining performance. (Gartenschläger 2018). Lack of support registered not only from the DFB functionaries, but also within the national team itself, argued Jerome Boateng:

“Where were the team colleagues, who thanked Mesut? Apparently, many did not dare to express themselves because they feared that it would not resonate well with German fans”. (Knopp & Hoffmann, 2018).

With his statement Boateng made clear a widespread phenomenon in the whole issue around Özil. Not only politicians but even DFB colleagues were afraid to lose popularity among fans, citizens and, according to Özil, even sponsors. However, it takes time for many to properly engage in the discussion, time which many do not have due to busy schedules. In this sense, the lack of support does not necessarily mean opposition to Özil, yet it makes him an easy target for hate speech.

In a similar vein Chancellor Angela Merkel abstractly responded that Özil's decision is to be respected despite different possible interpretations of the photo. Merkel also personally congratulated the topless Özil after the 3-0 victory against Turkey in 2010<sup>10</sup>, yet her decision not to express a more nuanced opinion on the Erdogan affair could also rely on the lack of information about the case. Finally, in a meeting with Özil and Gündogan, German President Steinmeier explained that he was initially “perplexed” about the photo but thinks that the two players understood the importance of “correcting” the public first impression.<sup>11</sup> While Merkel and Steinmeier considered the controversy to be cleared and closed, criticism of Özil did not cease as the national team dramatically failed in the World Cup. On the one hand, the Chancellor and the President showed tolerance towards the personality of Gündogan and Özil but stressed that the backlash in the media is out of their hands. On the other hand, those who fiercely attacked the players for the photos could interpret that as a lack of professionalism within the government. Certainly, ‘soft’ criticism from the government opened the door for more reckless accusations among the population which evolved into a vicious circle for Özil.

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9 Zeit, *DFB-Präsident räumt Fehler im Umgang mit Özil ein*, 19 08 2018.

10 Spiegel Online, *Merkel lobt Özil als “tollen Fußballspieler”*, 23 07 2018.

11 Spiegel Online, *“Bisschen ratlos gemacht”*, 06 06 2018.

### III. COMPARISON TO OTHER CASES IN THE WORLD OF SPORTS

The case of Mesut Özil is unique and unfortunate. However, others have similar struggles, even if they develop in a different way. Foremost, İlkay Gündogan, who was also on the photo and wrote “For my President” on the jersey for Erdogan, handled the situation differently.<sup>12</sup> He was in the same position as his team player but distanced himself quickly from the photo and even from later claims of racism by Özil. He expressed his explicit will to continue playing for Germany but also stressed his German identity by singing the national anthem.<sup>13</sup> Thus, he managed to place himself on the margins of the debate and mainly avoided further critique. Özil, on the contrary, was still taxed by his declining performance and by his postponed statement regarding the photo. Consequently, the team’s poor results in the World Cup affected Gündogan much less than it affected Özil. What if Özil had reacted faster, and if the DFB had permanently resolved this issue before the tournament began?

Beyond the case of Özil, others had similar struggles. During the same World Cup, former football star and still famously remembered celebrity, Lothar Matthäus met Russian President Vladimir Putin in the context of a FIFA delegation. Matthäus didn’t only compliment Putin for organizing a successful tournament but presented him a jersey and posed for pictures with the heavily criticized, authoritarian Putin. In his own words, Matthäus called himself “half Russian” because his wife, his fifth by the way, grew up in Moscow.<sup>14</sup> Although he was also criticized for his appeal to Putin, he didn’t get as much attention as Özil and was quickly forgotten. Would he be a traitor, if he himself had been of Russian descent? For the far-right in Germany that hypothetical case would still be less interesting since Matthäus would not fit into the role of the perfect scapegoat. The far-right is rather interested in blaming Muslims and Turks who failed integration. Yet, would Özil’s case have been forgotten also, if he had resisted the scandal and not quit the national team?

To the defence of Özil, it is never easy to meet a controversial president for anything but raw politics. The next example is a case in point about Marco van Basten. Like Matthäus, Van Basten was sent by FIFA as a functionary and had to meet Putin during the World Cup 2018. In his case, the criticism came from family members of the victims of flight MH17, which the Netherlands claim was shot down by Russia. Since Van Basten only fulfilled his minimal duty for FIFA, he did not feel responsible to represent the Dutch in the case of MH17.<sup>15</sup> Again, the critique of Van Basten faded away soon after. However, it makes two relevant points in connection with Özil’s case. One, hate comments in Germany did not take into consideration that Özil was invited to a formal charity event in London where he met Erdogan. Like Matthäus and Van Basten, Özil refrained from addressing political issues. In fact, Özil just did what was necessary to behave in a respectful way and to focus on the real reason of the event. Why then

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12 Sportbuzzer, *Ilkay Gündogan über den Rücktritt von Mesut Özil: “Ich hätte es anders gemacht”*, 28 08 2018.

13 Witt, Christian. *Neue Fakten zu İlkay Gündogan in Erdogan-Affäre*. 01 06 2018.

14 Welt. *Lothar Matthäus spricht im Kreml mit Wladimir Putin*. 06 07 2018

15 Süddeutsche Zeitung. *Van Basten über Putin-Besuch: Nur über Fußball gesprochen*. 12 07 2018

was Özil attacked so much harder than the other two? From a Western European perspective, there is no ground on which to criticize a visit to Erdogan harder than one to Putin. In fact, the real reason why Özil became the victim of the media doesn't seem to be completely exhausted by the personality of Erdogan. <sup>6</sup>

The controversy around the German handball star Stefan Kretzschmar brings back the focus from foreign authoritarian leaders to the domestic problem. At a time when the political climate around German identity is very tense Kretzschmar finds support in certain groups and claims that freedom of speech is limited at home.<sup>16</sup> His statement clearly provokes the “taboo topic” of criticism towards Merkel's open migrant policy. What is in fact interesting for our case study is that famous superstar Kretzschmar, whose family is of German descent, complains about the media and the public not giving him safe space to express himself. Whether he supports anti-establishment claims like the AfD is not primarily important here. What matters is the dichotomy of Kretzschmar and Özil who both blame the media and the public for their antithetical position.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, neither of them were prepared for such harsh reactions to their opinions. Still, Özil was hit harder by his opponents who claim that he is an *outsider* of society, while those who criticize the lack of freedom of speech in Germany are rather viewed as *backward*. In the end, both Kretzschmar and Özil left too much room for criticism in their posts and should not be surprised to receive heavy criticism from both sides in the current state of German affairs.

Should active athletes in general refrain from public engagement? It is nothing new that statements with a political impact have always had consequences. In 1968, John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists against black oppression while standing on the winner podium of the Olympic Games in Mexico. In 2016, Colin Kaepernick raised awareness for police violence and discrimination against black people in the U.S. by kneeling during the play of the national anthem.<sup>18</sup> Both examples show how athletes made conscious use of their status and popularity and broke the norms of leaving politics off the pitch. In North American society, right-wing defendants can perceive that as an insult against North American (tolerant) society, but xenophobia in Özil's case is rather concerned that Turkish minorities represent the long arm of an authoritarian foreign force. The real difference, however, is that Özil did not act to make a political statement yet was severely attacked for lack of loyalty by prominent AfD members.

After all his successes, be it in sports, integration or charity work, there were and still are many doubts among the far-right about Özil's loyalty. Other athletes may also be confronted with such provocations in the future but may deal differently with it. In the Netherlands, the 17-year old Mohammed Ihattaren faces the decision whether to play for the Dutch or the Moroccan national team once turning 18. Although football clubs and leagues are quite commercial and liberal in terms of diversity, national teams are still pivotal for identity questions because they cannot be changed. What if Geert Wilders' far-right PVV gains more power in

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16 Welt. “*Ich muss das aushalten*”. 19 01 2019

17 This does not mean, however, that Kretzschmar and Özil necessarily oppose each other personally.

18 Niemeyer, Jörg. *Sportler diskutieren über Trennung von Spiel und politischer Meinung*. 29 10 2018

the future, would that also increase pressure on Ihattaren as the AfD does in Germany? And would it matter if Ihattaren met with the Moroccan King Mohammed VI? It seems obvious that in this case it does in fact make a difference who is holding the office. In the Western media, Erdogan and Putin receive so much attention and criticism that a visit to the Moroccan King may not result in any provocation. Yet, the choice that Ihattaren is faced with shows how difficult it is to unite Moroccan and Dutch identity in his decisions without disrespecting either one. Still, Ihattaren certainly has more time to ponder about his choice of team, while Özil decided for Germany a decade ago and had little time to think about the consequences of the photo with Erdogan prior to it being made public.

That athletes in general have a strong representative function is obvious due to the popularity of sports. Contrary to Özil, others have made explicit use of their media position. So did Tommie Smith and John Carlos in the 1968 Olympics, when they drew public attention to racial discrimination in the USA. Contrary to Özil, they made intentional use of their media power albeit violating the IOC rules of staying apolitical. The outreach of the Black Power Salute seems to be greater because the message was clear. It is ironic that Özil's unintentional political implication seen as support for Erdogan evolved into such heated debates in Germany. Özil posted his photo on his own social media account and did not violate any rule, one could directly assume. The context in Germany is a more subtle one compared to the debate on racial discrimination on the other side of the Atlantic.

Finally, an interesting development is the fact that Özil invited Erdogan as best man to his wedding in 2019. Although the President did not stay long, critics in Germany used that event again as a story to feed their theories of betrayal. This time it was indeed Özil's voluntary decision to invite him so close, and many are afraid that he may be hiding something after all. Reasonably, most people in Germany think it would be absurd to invite Erdogan to their wedding, yet they wouldn't think of inviting Chancellor Merkel either. Despite Özil's popularity and responsibility in Germany, he also has the chance to build bridges, as he did not earn prizes for integration for no reason. One should keep in mind that, unlike in Western Europe and North America, people keep quite formal relationships with holders of high offices and that is what Western politicians themselves do.

## CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the foundation stones of the controversy surrounding Özil have already been laying within the deeper culture of Germany. Three examples from history show how athletes were meant to represent the German people and state physically and morally against Napoleon, under Hitler's NS-regime and in the post-war period. A more modern development and a shift in culture goes back to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since 2005, German society became more and more diverse, as did the national team. That opened the question of dual citizenship and whether it is possible to be a fan of two countries or personally represent two countries at the same time like Özil. German identity is becoming transnational in a positive sense, yet this tolerant "imagined community" becomes non-German and intolerable for the far-right. This strong bond between Germans and their love of football and loyal athletes built a slippery slope

for Mesut Özil to publish the photo with President Erdogan, easily portrayed as a betrayal of Germany. So far, most German legends of the “*Spitzengruppe*” are classical ‘native’ Germans and raise the barrier for Özil in gaining popularity among far-right and conservative citizens who doubt Özil’s German identity.

In the second part, the recent political developments in Turkey, the migrant crisis and integration issues in Germany paved the way for easy criticism of Özil. First, anyone affiliated with Erdogan could fall into the trap of being a friend of an autocrat. Second, the hot debate about the integration of Muslims during the migrant and refugee crisis in Germany casts suspicion among some people whether Muslims generally acknowledge German values. The combination of the two aspects put Özil and Gündogan into the center of attention. Thus the far-right party AfD could almost effortlessly attack Özil for betrayal and claim that the national team, as far as it is supposed to reflect German society, would not be classically German anymore. Politicians, among them Chancellor Merkel and President Steinmeier, distanced themselves from the photo with Erdogan and thus legitimized harsher criticism in the eyes of more extreme critics. The lack of support among DFB colleagues further left Özil alone in the media, after Gündogan quickly distanced himself from the photo and expressed his loyalty to German values. DFB functionaries failed to help their team member who fell into a vicious circle of critique and hate speech. His colleague Boateng aired the hypothesis that many were afraid to lose popularity by publicly defending Özil. Third, other cases involving athletes show that Özil is struggling with a situation that is much more common than it seems. However, others have found their way out more quickly by letting the criticism fade away or by distancing themselves from it. The examples show that reserved criticism of Özil is clearly not based on him being Muslim and Turk, but his religion and cultural roots were certainly instrumentalized and exaggerated by the far-right. For athletes it seems impossible not to generate strong disagreements in their own country, whether they try to debate politics, or meet Putin or Erdogan. This applies for the rather unintended consequences like the cases of Özil, Matthäus or Van Basten show, but also for the planned statements of Carlos, Smith and Kaepernick.

In general, this case study demonstrates how athletes cannot ignore the cultural and historical conditions of their environment and that they eventually must engage with these conditions and the consequences of their media presence. Even if discriminatory statements and fear to lose one’s popularity are in the wrong place in Özil’s story, he still carries the responsibility for publishing the photo and dealing with its consequences. Could Özil have anticipated the strong criticism in the form it took place? According to his declaration, he assumed there would be criticism. He also shows that he was aware of tensions with Grindel, so was he naïve not to expect a strong backlash? A question for further research would be: how much legitimacy do celebrities have to engage in (cultural) diplomacy?

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